

Arabism and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in the Writer Valle-Inclán

Giuditta Cianfanelli. Universitat de Barcelona and Università degli studi di Firenze, Italy

Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is an aesthetic and critical sensibility experienced by intellectuals on their travels because they have the opportunity to compare different cultures. It is a way of looking at humanity, art and knowledge. It is a contemporary current but is nothing new in world history, as Spanish Arabists, some modernist architects and writers such as Valle-Inclán showed us.

Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Spanish Arabists sought the roots of modern Spain in medieval Arab-Muslim elements, hidden and undervalued for many centuries. Some modernist¹ artists and writers expressed their desire for knowledge of a culture so distant and yet so close to them. Thus, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán in his controversial text *La lámpara maravillosa. Ejercicios espirituales* (“The Magic Lamp. Retreats”, 1916), also undervalued and sometimes misunderstood and considered an expression of Spanish modernist aesthetics and one of the most important texts of Spanish aesthetics of all time, cites among others the Islamic-Andalusi and Sufi thinker Ibn Tufail. Moreover, in many of his literary works Valle-Inclán uses Oriental elements, mixing them with American, Italian and classical features, and his poetics can be defined as eclectic and without temporal or cultural limits, the expression of an early aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

The concept of *aesthetic cosmopolitanism* is a subject of debate in contemporary sociology and explains the particular aesthetic and critical sensibility of citizens of our time, determined by frequent travels and by cultural consumption. It is a new point of view from which to construct extra-national and extra-cultural historical and anthropological maps enabling us to analyse and act differently in society. As Ulrich Beck states, the mixing of cultures is nothing new in world history; what is new is that it has become an object of reflection for the media and public opinion.

Cultural Cosmopolitanism of the School of Spanish Arabists

The concept of cosmopolitanism was born out of stoic philosophy as an opposition to the division of the world between Greek civilisation

1. Throughout the article the terms modernism and modernist refer to the Spanish artistic and literary current known as *modernismo* (Trans. note).

and barbarism and as an effort to overcome narrow definitions and barriers, whether geographical, linguistic or cultural. It expresses the desire for an open vision of the world, *super partes*, which can undermine all kinds of boundaries. For this reason, being cosmopolitan has meant going against the current or being poorly regarded by the dominant class although, at certain times, it has meant having a consensus, such as in the Enlightenment. In the 19th century, when the concept of nation was affirmed, the cosmopolitan spirit was generally and unjustly seen as something contrary to the patriotic spirit and suffered from a lack of credibility. In contrast, Angela Taraborelli argues that, according to some contemporary political theoreticians, the two spirits can coexist because they are complementary.

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We can see this complementarity between cosmopolitanism and patriotism in Spanish modernist architecture. For example, the Catalan architect Elias Rogent Amat, professor of Domènech Montaner and Gaudí, designed the Assembly Hall at the University of Barcelona and used Orientalist, Moorish and, in particular, Mudejar elements to express the Spanish national aesthetic spirit. The Spanish pavilions at the 1878 Paris World Fair or the 1888 Barcelona World Fair were also inspired by Mudejarism, which, as Alexander Cirici Pellicer states: “according to Pau Milà i Fontanals, it is the only properly Hispanic style.” Although architecture historians have preferred to speak of neo-Arab or neo-Mudejar episodes within a general *eclecticism* instead of a true Orientalist style, I believe that they show a similarity with

the research of Spanish Arabists, who seek concordance between the Arab-Muslim past of the Peninsula and its modern cultural features. Let us recall the Alhambra in Granada, which, following the publication of *Antigüedades árabes de España* (“Arab Antiquities of Spain”, 1787) became the stereotype of the Spanish architecture of the time and the emblem of the rediscovery of Arab-Spanish history.

The saviour of Arabic studies in Spain is Pascual de Gayangos Arce (1809-1897), the first professor of Arabic at the University of Madrid (1843). His disciple Francisco Codera Zaidín (1836-1917), considered the founder of the Arabist School, brought together some estimable academics, among whom Julián Ribera Tarragó (1858-1934) and Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944) are distinguished for their interest in comparative studies. The former studied the relations between the Spanish and the Arab-Muslims from a legal, social, educational and literary perspective. In the *Revista de Aragón* (1900-1905) he extensively examined “the Morocco problem”, emphasising that Spanish culture still has “patent signs of Muslim servitude” and that ignorance of the past, “of the most interesting period when our nationality was formed,” shows a “current scientific inability” that is dangerous for the future. The latter, Asín Palacios, a priest and theologian, devoted himself to the study of Islamic mysticism, comparing it to Christian mysticism. His study on the *Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (“Muslim Scatology in the Divine Comedy”, 1919), later published under the title *Dante y el Islam* (“Dante and Islam”) is very famous. It is a comparative text that caused a scandal and great controversy among Dante specialists, especially Italian, defenders of the national spirit and the pure originality of the *Commedia*.

Another of Codera’s disciples is Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912) who was not an Arabist but was concerned with the history of



Front matter of *The Lamp of Marvels*.

Spanish literature, science and aesthetics, and, in particular, the Middle Ages, also taking an interest in Spanish Arab-Muslim culture. Many of his works, such as the *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (“History of Heterodox Spaniards”, 1880-1881) or the “Prologue” of the first Spanish edition of *Filósofo Autodidacta de Aben Tofail* (“Aben Tofail’s *Philosophus autodidactus*”, 1900), translated for the first time into Spanish from Arabic by Francisco Pons Boigues (1861-1899), reflects his great interest in this culture. His disciple, the great philologist Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869-1968), also shared this interest. Both Menéndez figured prominently in the literary circles of Madrid and influenced many contemporary academics and writers with their ideas. They knew Ramón María del Valle-Inclán who like them often frequented the Ateneo de Madrid and was very popular in the cafés and literary circles. There are books by Menéndez Pelayo and Menéndez Pidal, as well as Asín Palacios, in Valle-Inclán’s library.

Finally, I would like to emphasise Francisco Fernández González (1833-1917), disciple of Gayangos, professor of aesthetics at the University of Madrid (from 1864) and at the Academia de San Fernando (from 1881),

who was interested in the relations between Oriental and Spanish literature and in American language: *Los lenguajes hablados por las indígenas de la América meridional* (“The Languages Spoken by the Natives of South America”, 1893). This was a lecture given at the Ateneo de Madrid, a text we can also find in Valle-Inclán’s library, which introduces a *cosmopolitan* aesthetic and literary approach with an interest in both Spanish Arabism and American exoticism.

Valle-Inclán Cites Ibn Tufail

Ramón María Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), the great Galician writer, lived predominantly in Madrid and is known for his modernist, symbolist and decadent novels: *Las Sonatas*. He had little success with theatre but later had some success with the *esperpentos*: rarely performed tragicomic and grotesque plays often regarded as difficult to perform but extensively studied by many distinguished academics.

His work *La lámpara maravillosa. Ejercicios espirituales* (1916) is less popular, a book that, despite the little attention paid to it by public and critics, he regarded highly. It is a text of a mixed nature which is not always easy to describe with rational descriptive and philological language: it brings with it the danger of reducing and denaturalising the poetic meaning of the book, written in a musical prose, without a strictly rational meaning but which like poetry and music tends more towards evoking rather than describing feelings. Its author said: “this is the book with which I am most satisfied, both for its form and because I think I achieved the idea I had of awakening in each of its readers diverse emotions and that, like the old books of the initiation schools of Alexandria, could have truths of eternal beauty, which are always new because anyone who senses them can interpret them.”

The *Lámpara* can be read as a theoretical-aesthetic essay, as he cites some artists and to some extent endeavours to represent a particular philosophical and epistemological theory of art and beauty. It is like a mystical breviary which shows how to achieve union with God. And, finally, it can be interpreted as an esoteric text, as it expresses many symbols and hidden analogies, notably including the “Abentofail” quote.

Only a few human beings can understand this individual path of knowledge and of approaching God, without the need for an established religion

Ibn Tufail (1110-1185) was a philosopher, astronomer and doctor to the Almohad Court, who was born in Guadix and died in Marrakech. Only one text has remained of his writings, known by the title of Pococke’s Latin translation: *Philosophus autodidactus* (1671) which I prefer to call by its Arabic name *Risala*, which means epistle. Ibn Tufail was a Sufi and in the *Risala* expresses the ambition and capacity for knowledge of human beings. It is an allegorical tale of a savage, called Hayy, who was raised by a gazelle. Through physical observation of matter and of earthly objects he attains knowledge of mathematics, the stars and the constellations, until intuitively achieving mystical vision, the supreme truth, God. Only a few human beings can understand this individual path of knowledge and of approaching God, without the need for an established religion.

The *Lámpara* and the *Risala* are two esoteric texts with many similarities, the most interesting being the union of knowledge, love, beauty and God: “Love is an aesthetic and theological circle, and art is a discipline for transmigrating in the essence of things and searching for God on its paths”; “every time they saw a being blessed with beauty, splen-

dour, perfection, power, or any superiority, he reflected and recognised that it was an outpouring of this Creator, of his existence and his action.” We also find in the two texts the idea of the circular movement of stars related with divine beauty: with his cleaning, Hayy attempts to imitate the brilliance of celestial bodies and perform, like them, a circular movement: “Any supreme expression of beauty is a divine centre that engenders infinite circles.”

Why does Valle-Inclán cite this Sufi in his modernist aesthetic text? Does he seek to emphasise the importance of medieval Arab-Muslim culture for contemporary Spain like some of his contemporaries? I believe that Valle-Inclán was probably interested in the esoteric and Sufi aspect of the *Risala*, which could be applied to his idea of seeking absolute and mystical beauty in the *Lámpara*, a text directly related with Sufism and that expresses the eclectic and Arabist period in which he trained. But I think that Valle-Inclán was also interested in emphasising the process of rediscovering and revaluing the culture and past of Arab-Muslim Spain, thereby expressing an idea of cultural and *aesthetic cosmopolitanism*.

Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Valle-Inclán

Throughout Valle-Inclán’s poetics we constantly find a desire to *evade* reality, perceived as insufficient, a longing probably determined from a subtle and constant existential disquiet. The perception of reality, in keeping with European aesthetics, is enhanced by synaesthesia, symbolisms, the use of cultured and concealed quotations, the evocation of names of famous thinkers and artists of the past or glorious periods of artistic expression. Valle-Inclán also uses a certain kind of Orientalism or Arabism. The critics Gullón and Litvak generally prefer to talk about *exoticism* and identify it with the

desire for *evasion* from the middle class reality which is seen as trivial, boring, futile and perhaps stupidly conservative. But I do not believe it is limited to this. José Servera Baño defines exoticism of the poetry collections of Valle-Inclán *El pasajero* (“The Passenger”, 1920) and *La pipa del kif* (“Kif’s Pipe”, 1919) as an instrument for distancing from reality, as an “evasive formula of everyday surroundings,” perfectly inserted into Spanish modernism and its constant desire for beauty.

Servera Baño goes one step further in terms of this interpretation, which I would call *classical*, of Spanish literary modernist Orientalism, when he reflects on the *cosmopolitan* aspect of Valle-Inclán’s exoticism, which takes inspiration from two worlds: the Mexican and the Oriental. In the works of Valle-Inclán we find the reconstruction of Latin American and particularly Mexican settings,² and we also find the reconstruction of a setting that is “Orientalist, so-called given its ambiguity and abstraction, which has features of highly diverse locations: African and Asian brushstrokes especially from the Islamic world, although also from other places such as India and China,” about which Valle-Inclán, according to Baño, had “more literary information than any other kind.” Servera Baño demonstrated the “cosmopolitan effect” in the mixing of Oriental themes with Hispano-American themes, a fusion of materials of such diverse origin that it seemed to Valle-Inclán a unique example in his time, going beyond the conception of exoticism as evasion and presenting an aesthetic ideal of overcoming cultural limits: this is why I have spoken of *aesthetic cosmopolitanism*.

The protagonist of the *Sonatas*, the Marquis of Bradomín, an autobiographical figure,

expresses this aesthetic ideal well: “As an adventurer of other times, I lost myself in the vastness of the old Aztec Empire, an empire of unknown history, buried forever with the mummies of its kings, among cyclopean remains that speak of civilisations, of religions, of races that once were and only find their equal in that mysterious and remote Orient.” In *Sonata de estío* (“Summer Sonata”, 1903), an amorous and perverse tale, the protagonist-writer, a Romantic adventurer, feels an urge similar to what we find in *Voyage en Espagne* (1894) by Théophile Gautier. However, in Valle-Inclán there is also a historical desire to recover the past to which he belongs. It is the same interest in investigating roots that we find in Arabists.

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The female protagonist of *Sonata de estío* also reflects cosmopolitan Orientalism: “The child Chole remembers an Arab houri (90) and a Hindu priestess (95), but also a Japanese mousmé.” An “Oriental princess”, called Salambó or Lili, who sometimes seems like an “Indian princess”, or a Mayan priestess, whose race is “so ancient, so noble, so mysterious that she seems to have emigrated from the depths of Assyria.” Valle-Inclán shows sympathy and respect for these ancient civilisations. The Marquis of Bradomín also often cites Italian civilisation: he explains that he was in Urbino and Rome as a member of the Noble Guard of His Holiness, recalls the art of the Italian Renaissance and the poetry of

2. In this article, I do not analyse *Tirano Banderas. Novela de tierra caliente* (“Tirano Banderas. A Novel of Warm Lands”, 1926), an *exotic* and *esperpéntico* tale set in Latin America and in which Valle-Inclán uses many Hispano-American words.

Petrarch and he recites to his love seven sonnets in Italian by Pietro Aretino. Meanwhile, let us recall that Pico della Mirandola is cited in the *Lámpara*.

Abdellah Djbilou, a scholar who studies the Orientalist tendency of Spanish modernism, shows how in selected Arab-themed passages some writers have evoked the Islamic world to the point of identifying with it. Djbilou was convinced that although interest in the Orient had often coincided with “colonial pretensions, modernism, in contrast, has had one of the most noble attitudes in this interest in the Orient.” Hence, this shows an intellectual generosity of modernist writers that seems to me comparable with that of the Arabist School.

Hence, western Orientalism creates an “anti-humanistic” form of political and economic domination, which rather than expanding knowledge of Islam has increased lack of knowledge, anti-Semitism and false representation

The idea of *cultural cosmopolitanism* of Spanish Orientalists goes beyond the idea presented by Edward Said when he wrote that the Orientalism of western countries, referring mainly to France, England and the United States, believes that “knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.” Hence, western Orientalism creates an “anti-humanistic” form of political and economic domination, which rather than expanding knowledge of Islam has increased lack of knowledge, anti-Semitism and false representation. Said accuses Reinhart Dozy (1820-1883) and his *Spanish Islam: A History of the Muslims in Spain* (1861) of anti-Semitism while he praises Massignon and Gibb. He also accuses Orientalists of only being concerned with events and not with literature and in this context he talks

of “dehumanisation”. In any case, Said recognises that his critical vision does not encompass “the important contributions to Orientalism of countries such as Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain and Portugal.”

To some extent I can understand the vision of Orientalism as domination, or exoticism and evasion, but the important thing is to know that they are not the only ones. There are many modernist academics, writers, artists or architects who have made their conception of the Orient a “generator of beauty.” It is an attempt at *aesthetic cosmopolitanism*, at a positive and authentic development of the meeting of different and beautiful cultures. It is a specific message of hope and beauty which is also useful today at a time when we need a new concept of extra-national and extra-cultural identity, which also helps to construct a new relationship between western cultures and Arab-Islamic cultures.

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